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Housekeepers' Chat

Thurs. Nov. 10/27

(NOT FOR PUBLICATION)

Subject: "House Plants in Winter."

ANNOUNCEMENT: Timely information about ferns and geraniums, and house plants in general, from the Bureau of Plant Industry.

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The other day I called up W.R.B., a garden adviser in the Department of Agriculture, who furnishes garden information for town farmers.

"Listen here, W.R.B.," I said, in agitated accents, "I've scheduled a talk on 'House Plants in Winter,' and you know very well that I can't speak with authority on this subject."

"Right you are," said W.R.B., "and what are you going to do about it?"

"Do about it?" I repeated. "I thought I'd ask you to give my listeners some pointers, on the care of houseplants. Would you be so kind?"

"Certainly," said W.R.B., obligingly. "Come on over, and tell me what you want to know."

Well, I told my friend what I wanted to know -- mainly, why houseplants are so temperamental; why they will just naturally grow all over the place, for some women, and won't even produce one spindling floweret, for others.

"Aunt Sammy," said the garden adviser, "there is nothing mysterious about the care of house plants, but nearly every kind of plant has its special requirements. In taking care of house plants, imitate nature, just as nearly as possible. At this time of the year, when the days are getting shorter and shorter, house plants often suffer for sunlight. Right now I have a most wonderful Maidenhair fern in the southeast corner of my dining room. It gets sunshine, four or five hours, every day. It seems to like this treatment, for it is growing beautifully. Of course, even plants must have a period of rest. This Maidenhair fern occasionally puts on a lot of little spores, on the under sides of the leaves, and the leaves turn rather brown. Then I trim off all the older leaves, and the new ones start.

"Now, about watering plants. Some people have a notion that a houseplant is like a camel, and that if it has a drink of water about once every nine days, it will be happy and contented. But houseplants are not camels. They want a little water, every day. Not too much water, not enough to make the ground wet and heavy, not enough to stand in the saucer under the flower pot, but just enough water to keep the soil reasonably moist. Remember that houseplants want water every day. They need a little more in cold weather, when the furnace is going strong, because the extra heat dries out the air, and this in turn dries out the soil, in which the plants are growing."

R-H. C. 11/10/27.

"Now when it comes to palms, remember that they do not want much sunshine. In nature, most of the smaller kinds of palms, those used for houseplants, grow in the shade, and under the larger trees. Therefore, the sun they get, filters through the leaves of the larger trees. If palms are exposed to direct sunlight, their leaves become yellow and spotted."

I thanked W. R. B. for the information about ferns and palms, and asked him whether geraniums could be successfully grown in the house.

"Yes," said W.R.B. "Geraniums can be grown as houseplants. When you pot them in the fall, be sure there is plenty of sand in the potting soil. Plenty of sand, just a pinch of bone meal, and a very little rotted manure, should be added to the garden loam in which geraniums are potted. If you want your geraniums to be nice and compact, for houseplants, you should make some cuttings from those growing in the outdoor garden, along about the middle of August, and keep them in flower pots, because if you lift the geraniums from where they are growing in the ground, they are apt to lose most of their leaves, when brought into the house. Be careful not to water geraniums too much. If you water them too much, they will have plenty of leaves, but very few flowers."

"Please tell me," I said, at this point, "what kind of a plant I could have in a sunny south window this winter. I want something easy to grow."

"Begonias," answered the Garden Adviser. "Begonias, especially the dwarf, compact sorts, make beautiful houseplants, for a sunny south window. They are easy to grow, and want about the same general treatment as the Maidenhair fern."

"I shall get a begonia," I said. "A begonia is just what I want, for my south window. Now tell me what has happened to my Boston fern. It is a beautiful plant. It completely fills my 12-inch fern pan, and now the leaves are beginning to die. What's wrong with my fern?"

"Just this," said W.R.B. "Nature is asserting herself. Your fern is suffering for want of room to spread. In other words, the fern has used up all the space in the fern pan, and can't go any further, to hunt fresh soil. Really, you had better take this fern out of the pot, and divide it. You might make three or four, or even more plants out of it, or simply take off a part of the plant, and re-pot the best portion of the fern, in fresh soil. Then remove all the old leaves, and your fern will make a new growth, and be beautiful again. Don't water it too heavily, just a little at a time. Remember that houseplants can't stand wet feet."

"Thanks for the advice," I said. "And what do you know about primroses? They look so beautiful, in the flower shops. Do you suppose I could have a primrose this winter, in the house?"

"Perhaps," said the Garden Adviser. "The primrose does make a beautiful houseplant, but, it has a poisonous effect on some people. That is, it affects the skin, as poison ivy does. If you have ever come in direct contact with the primrose, and it has poisoned your hands or arms, better not have a primrose in your house. However, not everybody suffers from primrose poisoning. Primroses certainly are beautiful houseplants, especially in the winter time, when it is so difficult to have blooms in the house."

K-H. C. 11/10/27.

"If you want a pretty table decoration," continued my friend, "why don't you get a cyclamen? Cyclamen will be on the market soon. Buy one that is just coming into bloom, water it once a day, give it a little sunshine, and you'll have a beautiful centerpiece for your table."

"A good suggestion," I said, "for my dining room table. Now are there any special points, about taking care of houseplants, that my listeners might want to know?"

"Let me see," said the garden adviser. "You might remind your friends that houseplants need a bath, at least once a month, to clean the dust from their foliage. Don't forget that it is difficult to keep houseplants in a room where open kerosene or gas heaters are used. The fumes from a gas stove are very hard on houseplants. Most houseplants do fairly well at an ordinary living room temperature, but they suffer from becoming chilled, as they often are on cold nights, when the furnace is neglected. Putting newspapers between the plants and the window, on cold nights, will help to protect them. Some people think that houseplants are too much trouble to bother with, in the winter time, but a few plants, not a whole house full, add a great deal to the cheer of a home. A good specimen plant, like the Maidenhair fern, or a Boston fern, adds a pleasant touch of green to the living room. They may be something of a bother, but they are worth all they cost," concluded W.R.B.

I didn't ask W.R.B. whether he would answer your questions about houseplants, but I think he would. I'll send him a copy of the new green radio cookbook, and then I'm sure he'll answer any questions my listeners ask him.

Speaking of the cookbook, I had an interesting experience the other day. I was eating lunch, in an out-of-the-way tea room, when I heard my name mentioned. Of course, I couldn't help but listen.

"Aunt Sammy's Radio Recipes," I heard a voice say. "It's a cookbook, and honestly, my dear, it has the most glorious recipes!"

I've heard the recipes called delicious, and appetizing, and tempting, but this is the first time I've heard them called "glorious." Now I wonder which recipe she meant. Do you suppose it was the Upside-down Apple Cake?

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